FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GANG RELATED ACTIVITIES AMONGST SOUTHEAST ASIAN YOUTHS

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Abstract

of

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GANG RELATED ACTIVITIES AMONGST SOUTHEAST ASIAN YOUTHS

By

Alvin Thlang

This study addresses the prevalent issue of factors contributing towards gang related activities amongst Southeast Asian youth gangs. The research study involves a sample of 10 participants, 5 ex-gang members and 5 legal and educational professionals, who were surveyed about their knowledge about the uniqueness of Cambodian youth gangs, factors contributing to gang membership, societal-economic costs of gangs, and recommendations for intervention. Study findings indicated that the Cambodian youth involved in gangs are most influenced ecologically by their low income communities and intergenerationally by their family members. They are also uniquely influenced by their family’s refugee experience.

The findings in the study report the concerns of high societal and economic costs of youth gangs. Family and peer support is the most effective intervention to help Cambodian youth gangs get out of gangs. An ethnic specific mentoring youth program is also recommended.

Francis Yuen, DSW, ACSW

Date

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Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Youth gangs and violence in the United States has been characterized as aggressive behavior promoted through verbal or physical abuse involving young persons between the ages of ten and twenty. These gang behaviors include violent acts such as: assault, robbery, rape and homicide against other youth and members of the community. For many decades, there has been a drastic increase of youth gangs, particularly within ethnic communities. By exploring this social issue and identifying the factors contributing to the rise in youth gangs and violence, we can utilize prevention and intervention techniques to help focus on positive reinforcements and build healthy and productive citizens.

In recent years, researchers tried to explore various ethnic communities, specifically the Southeast Asian community, to understand the reason for the influx of Cambodian youth gangs. With the shortage of published research literature on the population, it is very difficult for social workers to gather information for research. Southeast Asian gangs became popular in the 1980’s and grew substantially because of the rapid growth of these communities. Since the population is growing rapidly, it is essential to explore this population in a study to decrease the youth gang involvement. Alleviating this social issue can help build community cohesiveness and spark upward mobility in the Southeast Asian community, whose immigration began in the 1960’s to 1970’s. The focus of this study is on Southeast Asian youth gangs, specifically
Cambodian youth gangs and the researcher would like to explore factors contributing to
gang-related activities to grasp a clear understanding of how we, as a society, can
effectively alleviate this social issue to build productive citizens.

Personal Experience

Growing up in Oakland, California, in a community with high crime rates and
youth gang violence, I witnessed the struggles and conflicts experienced by members of
the Cambodian community. Cambodians immigrated to America during the late 1970’s
to early 1980’s, to escape the devastating war in Cambodia and to try to start a better life
for their families (Nakasako & Ny, 1995). Relatively new to an unfamiliar country, these
immigrants were forced to adapt to American society and culture, which created many
dilemmas. The lack of understanding of the American culture created a gap between the
Cambodian community and main-stream society and made it more difficult for these
immigrants to assimilate. They also experienced a language barrier that led to the
inability to access community resources. These monolingual Khmer-speaking
immigrants came to the United States and struggled to communicate with their
surroundings making it difficult to utilize many much needed community resources from
mental health clinics, non-profit organizations, and other government resources.
Although some immigrants were able to find assistance, they did not receive adequate
service due to the shortage of bilingual professionals. Although there are currently more
bilingual professions available to assist the Cambodian population, there is still a
shortage in the public services field.
Background of the Problem

Historically, ethnic gangs started off as a protection group to help their community combat racial tension from other race groups. For instance, when the Italians immigrated to the United States in the 1800’s, the discrimination they faced from other ethnic groups caused them to form their own ethnic gangs to protect their people. “These gangs fought constantly among themselves, but they united as the ‘Mickies,’ to battle black gangs to the east.” (Diamond, 2005, par.2). This pattern was also evident in the 1800s, when the Chinese migrated to the United States. They too felt threatened and experienced racism resulted in the formation of organized gangs to protect their people and community. Progressively, Chinese gangs became stronger and their power and dominance caused other ethnic gangs to retreat. However, as these gangs became more organized and powerful, they eventually targeted their own community members.

When new immigrant groups settled in the United States, through the different waves of immigration, the same pattern persevered. After the initial Asian American wave of immigration, the “new,” Southeast Asian immigrant groups arrived in America, as refugees fleeing from their particular war-torn countries. They migrated to the United States from 1961 to 1994 making them fairly new to the United States. This wave of immigrants, considered involuntary immigrants, consisted of Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Hmong people (Lee, 1998). These immigrants were tremendously different from other immigrant groups coming to America, because they were “forced” out of their country due to the Vietnam War. Most of these refugees fled their countries to refugee
camps in neighboring countries, and arrived in large numbers to the United States after 1975.

Statement of Research Problem

Cambodians have been in the United States for less than forty years. They are a fairly new population trying to be nationally recognized by other race groups. Being that Cambodians are “unfamiliar,” to the society, there is scare research on this population, mainly the youth gang population. Local communities, with high concentration of Cambodians, acknowledge that Cambodian youth gangs are a serious problem, but this does not ignite researchers to research about this topic. It is essential to address and improve this social issue; therefore we need more researchers to focus on this problem.

Although research has been done on the Cambodian youth gang population, sufficient or extensive research has not been completed, and this presents a problem for our society. It is an immensely growing issue in our society and extremely proves that we need more academic research on this concern. It is important for members of the ethnic community to address this issue so that we can help narrow the gap to make it easier for researchers to obtain useful information to help the youth gang population. This social issue not only affects the individual and their family, but also society so we must come together and advocate for changes before the dilemma gets even bigger.

On a societal and economical level, the violent behaviors of youth gangs have an adverse effect on the cost of health care, property values, incarceration and educational attainment, which, ultimately, affects taxpayers. More and more youths are going to hospital emergency rooms because of violent acts and the majority of them do not have
proper healthcare, which taxpayers are funding. Furthermore, government property is
often vandalized during gang activities which require the city to repair at the taxpayers’
expense. Additionally, taxpayers also pay for those incarcerated in the prison system,
which, ironically, costs more taxpayer dollars than keeping a youth in school.

Henceforth, with extensive research conducted on the population, society can
reduce the youth gang problem and, consequently, cut costs for taxpayers and, ultimately,
 improve our society’s productivity in the long run. It is tremendously important that we
as a society raise awareness on the issue of youth gang violence beyond the city level and
reach for national attention. When the nation acknowledges the issue, positive changes
will be accomplished to reduce Southeast Asian youth gangs and violence.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to find factors that contribute to the influence of gang
related activities amongst Southeast Asian youth and find prevention and intervention
techniques for an efficient Cambodian youth program that will help alleviate this social
issue. The idea of the youth program is to create an environment with an opportunity for
change. Many of the common youth center socialization group approaches lack
consideration for cultural competency and do not allow at-risk Cambodian youths an
opportunity for change. They do not encourage youths to open up and voice their
concerns pertaining to their culture, background, and family history. Our communities
could highly benefit from a program that uniquely addresses concerns for Asian youth
that is different from the common mentoring program that already exists. The program
will be structured in a way that will expose these gang members to ex-gang members of
similar culture, background, and ethnicity and allow the youth to learn about their
experiences. I believe that interacting with ex-gang members who have been in similar
situations will keep the youths engaged.

Gang violence and youth gang membership can easily be avoided through
prevention and early afterschool programs that consist of mentors with similar ethnicities
that will help guide these youths towards the path of success. Afterschool programs
allow youths an alternative to gangs and violence and occupy the youth’s time from the
hours of 2:00 pm-6:00 pm when youth crimes are at its peak. This type of environment
will also create a safe haven for youths from negative influences, such as gangs, in their
communities. Without afterschool programs that educate and occupy free time, at-risk
youths are forced to participate in activities that do not necessarily challenge them both
physically and mentally in a positive manner. As a result, some youths end up mingling
with members in their community that promote negative behaviors. If more ethnic
programs exist that allow impoverished youths a chance to occupy their free time, these
gang youths could gain different positive perspectives from mentors instead of gang
leaders in their gang-infested communities.

Definition of Terms

• Assimilation: One of the outcomes of the acculturation process, in which the
subordinate or smaller group is absorbed into the larger or dominant one and
becomes indistinguishable from it in cultural terms (Tan, 1999, p. 22).

• Cambodia: Located in Southeast Asia, and is bordered by the Gulf of Thailand,
Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. The total land area is 176,520 kilometers. In
comparison, it is slightly smaller than the State of Oklahoma. The Capital city is Phnom Penh (Seng, 2005, p. xv).

- Khmer: Cambodian
- Khmer Rouge Regime: In 1975 the Khmer Rouge, or the predominantly China-backed Cambodian revolutionaries, were led by Pol Pot to legalize the Communist government and to rename Cambodia “Democratic Kampuchea.” Between one and three million people were killed or died of starvation and illness during the reign of terror loosely termed the “Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot” era which officially lasted from April 1975 to January 1979” (Tan, 1999, p. 19).
- Refugee: any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Tan, 1999, p. 20).

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the problems associated with youth violence and gangs and utilizing the ecological perspective and cognitive behavioral theory will better explain the influences and causes for youth gang membership and violent behaviors. The ecological perspective (Germain & Gitterman, 1995) and cognitive behavior theory (Beck, 1976) will help us understand the specifics of the problems and suggest avenues to minimize
risk factors for violence and gang involvement. We will identify these factors on a micro, mezzo, and macro level through an ecological perspective and recognize the ability to understand and learn behaviors of these youths through the cognitive behavioral theory; thus, suggesting an intervention to fix this social problem.

Assumptions

This study is based on the following assumptions: 1) there are several historical factors that contribute to the youth gang epidemic, 2) this youth gang issue affects not only the respective community involved but also everyone in society, 3) currently, there are no definitive programs or services addressing this ethnic-specific youth gang issue, and 4) there are ways to enhance the current general programs to cater towards ethnic specific youth groups.

Justification

The goal of the social work profession is to serve and help the most vulnerable members of the population by fulfilling basic needs for the improvement of the quality of life for our clients. My research project will benefit the profession of social work because it will provide more information about the “unfamiliar” Cambodian population. Being that the Southeast Asian population is relatively new to the United States, there is not a lot of research done on the population in general. The Cambodian youth gang issue is growing rapidly and we fail to fully understand the reason for this epidemic. The end result of my research will create a foundation for social workers and give them a better understanding of the Cambodian population.
Limitations

Since this research is partially based on gathering information from ex-gang members, it is hard to contact or communicate with them because of their covert lifestyle. Most ex-gang members who have effectively grown out of the lifestyle realize that they have done badly in the past and would rather remove the negative memories and events from their mental schemas. During my subject search, I had difficulties finding ex-gang members willing to share their experiences. There is a big issue with confidentiality because most of these ex gang members do not want to disclose information in fear of being prosecuted or charged for crimes they have committed. Others do not want to “leak” information about their past or their gang’s current operation because they or their families might be targeted and harmed by gang members.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of My Research

Because Cambodian immigrants have only been in the United States for roughly less than 40 years, they are relatively unfamiliar to the general public. Often times, Cambodian immigrants travel to different parts of the country and are frequently asked “What is Cambodian?” It is difficult to teach others about the Cambodian culture and history without referring to the atrocities the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge left on the war-torn country. Frequently, the general population automatically associates Cambodians as refugees or gang members, simply because there is limited published literature on this group.

Even after extensive research, it was very difficult to obtain scholarly sources about Cambodian youth gangs. “In Ronald Takaki’s extensive history of Asian Americans, Strangers from a Different Shore, he devotes only 23 pages out of 500 to Southeast Asian American history, and only three pages to Cambodian Americans” (Wallitt, 2005, p. 42) Only a handful of articles can be found regarding the Cambodian youth gang population within various reference resources such as university libraries, librarians, and interlibrary systems.

It is unfortunate that there is minimal research done on this population, even though the problem is being well-recognized by law enforcement and local communities with high concentrations of Cambodians. Most of the information obtained for the study is by utilizing newspapers, internet sources, and documentaries. However, the searches
utilizing these methods result in articles focusing mainly on other Asian groups such as the Vietnamese and Hmong populations. There is clearly a severe shortage of academic discussion on Cambodian youth gangs, which establishes that researchers require Cambodian-specific studies in order to effectively serve the population. The lack of proper attention within academia further highlights the significance of the current study to the social work profession and to society, in general.

Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge Regime Affect on Cambodian Refugees

In 1955, Prince Norodom Sihanouk proclaimed Cambodia as neutral with the United States. The North Vietnam communist government used this to their advantage and built stations in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. In 1969, the policy was changed due to pressure from the United States. The revised policy allowed the United States to invade Cambodia to force the Vietnamese communist government out of the country; which lead to Operation Menu: the secret bombing of Cambodia. “In 1969 and 1970 U.S. President Richard Nixon, without congressional approval, ordered the ‘secret’ and illegal bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War to eradicate the supply routes the Viet Cong were using through Cambodia (Wallit, 2005).

Over 100,000 tons of explosives were dropped on the country, arguably making Cambodia the most heavily bombed country in history (Owen & Kiernan, 2006). The bombing left thousands of innocent people killed and the country in shreds.

The Secret War not only left the Cambodian people in total disarray, but it also sparked the Khmer Rouge, a communist group, to arise. From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge, commanded by Pol Pot, instigated a revolution that sparked a dramatic change to
the country (Ong, 2003). They called it “Year Zero,” in which the country’s focus was to start anew by, abolishing culture, religion and any attachments of the old institutions. In addition to the abolishment, the Regime strived to build a self-sustaining agrarian utopia, a country that can fend itself from foreign countries. Cambodian elders referred to this time as the period of “social reversals,” where the rural ruled the urban, uneducated ruled the educated, and sometimes children ruled their parents. The Khmer Rouge recruited peasants to enforce rules and regulations on the people and many of those peasants included young children. The result of the proposed revolutionary idea turned disastrous under Pol Pot’s rule because many of his wishes and actions forced people into oppressive environments. For instance, in the hopes of creating an agricultural surplus, he pushed all Cambodians into agricultural labor camps with dangerous, often deadly conditions.

During this time, Cambodians were forced into these labor camps and work in brutal conditions. Along the way, hundreds of families were broken up and many people died. The Khmer Rouge Regime left an estimated 1.5 million Cambodians dead from malnutrition or being overworked in the labor camps. Samkhann Khoeun, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge Regime, talked about his experiences and survival during Pol Pot’s Regime and immigration to the United States (Khoeun, 2003, p. 127). Samkhann, resembling of many other Khmers, was separated from his family and forced into labor camps. When the Khmer Rouge took over, many Cambodians were targeted, mainly people who were educated and connected to the Cambodian government, so they had to flee to different parts of the country or to neighboring countries to avoid execution.
Samkhann was one of the lucky ones who were able to survive this Regime by the time the Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia in the 1970’s to help eradicate the Khmer Rouge. As a result, Cambodians fled to Thailand for interviews by sponsors, through the U.S. refugee program, to migrate to America. “The interview process went very smoothly. But the waiting period before that was long. It took us over a year to get to America, from September 1983 until November 1984” (Khoeun, 2003, p. 136). Samkhann, along with thousands of other Cambodian refugees, was fortunate enough to have the chance to escape death and immigrate to the United States.

Thousands of Cambodian refugees experienced and witnessed violent acts of the war and faced death threats by the Khmer Rouge. During this time, many people struggled to keep their families together and tried to protect each other from being executed. The Khmer Rouge tortured and killed many people, including women and children. Through this experience, refugees became accustomed to sounds of gun shots and the displays of brutality of their people.

Not only was this traumatic experience detrimental to the people’s physical health, but it also caused a significant psychological impact on these refugees. These Cambodians witnessed violent acts that become normalized and this caused them to suffer from trauma, paranoia, and depression. Many of the people that fled to different parts of Asia for relocation suffered from these psychological disorders, caused definitely by the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge revolution.
Immigration

A large influx of Cambodian refugees in the United States occurred since 1979 when the United States refugee program allowed Cambodians from refugee camps in Thailand to migrate to America. This agreement was enacted as a result of the United States brutality in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. By 1990, more than 150,000 Cambodians immigrated to the United States and settled in various parts of the country with the help of sponsors who provided them with support and referrals to government services. Being distraught by rough past experiences, these immigrants endured transition into American society and struggled to adapt and assimilate to American values and norms.

Cambodian Refugee Experience in the United States

In America, our society has socially constructed race in order to distinguish the different cultures and groups within our country but does not emphasize the different cultures and groups within each race group, specifically the Asian American group. Many different Asian communities in the United States have been defined by their long history of immigration into the United States and their ability to assimilate into the American ways. These different ethnic groups who are placed in the “Asian American” category have very different cultures, beliefs, and values. Some Asian groups such as the Chinese and Japanese Americans have integrated more successfully as “model minorities” while others such as the Cambodians are at the bottom of the Asian American hierarchy, struggling to survive in this oppressive society. These Cambodians (the newer “others”) are struggling in our society to be recognized and to have a voice in the Asian
American and American societies. The experiences of Cambodian Americans not only portrays the struggles of less fortunate Asians suffering from a harsh transition from the refugee experience through culture clash and assimilation, but it also challenges the traditional definition of who is really “Asian American.”

Cambodian Americans challenge the traditional definition of who is “Asian American” because they are considered the minority of the minorities. Claire Kim states that there is a racial triangulation between Asians, Blacks and Whites (Kim, 2001, p. 39). She states that it is a model that displays a pyramidal hierarchy among White Europeans, Asian Americans, and Blacks. The Whites are at the top of the diagram as the most superior while being considered an insider. Asian Americans are in the middle and considered foreign and inferior to White. Although they are inferior to Whites, they are superior to blacks who are at the bottom of the pyramid and shown to be inferior to Whites and Asian Americans but considered to be as much of an insider as Whites. In regards to Cambodian refugees, I believe racial triangulation would no longer be the case because Asian Americans in the model would be split up into Asian American and Southeast Asian American. The term Asian American would include those who are successfully integrated as model minorities like the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean groups and the Southeast Asians such as the Cambodian’s would probably be the most inferior and foreign in this model. Cambodian Americans further challenge this definition of Asian American because they, along with other Southeast Asian groups, experience higher poverty rates and receive minimal help from the more economically established Asian American groups. Most Southeast Asian refugee families are still
struggling to survive compared to other Asian groups that have been in the United States for many decades longer. Arriving to the United States with minimal skills to be productive in this society has given them no other choice but to survive off of public assistance from the government.

To depend on someone else is not really well accepted. It takes away their pride. But they’re willing to close their eyes because they have no other choice. So they think they’ll accept public assistance temporarily—until their children grow up to support them or until they themselves learn enough English, learn enough to be on their own. Being on welfare takes away their pride (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 20).

Cambodian Americans are faced with the issues of assimilation into the American society and the difficulty of living up to the name “Asian American.” Asian Americans, in general, have dealt with oppression from American society but have successfully obtained educational achievement and economic lives, thus receiving the title “Model Minority” coined by William Peterson in the mid 1960s. Although this title can be controversial because of its “subservient” tone, it shows that the “Asian American,” group is superior to other race groups because of their ability to rapidly assimilate and be successful in this society.

Although this term was meant to be “positive” for this population, some have claimed that it was detrimental because it promoted racial stereotyping and caused conflicts within the Asian American community and with other ethnic groups because of the competition it creates. Asian Americans, being the “top,” minority group, leave us with the title of being just a “minority” group, never the majority.
The problem, as it pertains to Southeast Asians, is that this title lumps all Asian American groups into one and does not take into consideration the fact that Southeast Asians continue to struggle in educational and economical attainment in this society.

The model minority stereotype is dangerous because it tells Asian Americans and other minorities how to behave. The stereotype is dangerous because it is used against other minority groups to silence claims of inequality [as well as] the experiences of Asian Americans who can/do not achieve model minority success (Wallitt, 2005, pp. 41-42).

Unlike the Asian American groups such as the Chinese and Japanese who migrated to America earlier, Cambodian refugees had a different migration experience and still struggle to achieve this “model minority” success.

Being forced out of the comfort of one’s own homeland, involuntarily into a foreign country with different values, beliefs, and standards can create many complications for anyone experiencing such drastic changes. Although these refugees were force out of Cambodia, they did not complain but as they saw an opportunity to escape the harsh realities of the war and the ability to give their future generations a better chance to thrive in a country with more resources and opportunities for success.

In the United States, Cambodian American refugees had many obstacles to overcome to settle in this new environment. Most of these refugees came to the United States with literally just the clothes on their back, and many lacked formal education and work experience. The lack of these qualifications made it hard for Cambodians to obtain good paying jobs and resulted with refugees taking odd, low paying jobs. As an effort to
save money to survive in this society, many Cambodian refugees, who come from the average family size of five people, could only afford to live in low income communities. This was the only way to live, considering their minimal financial support and unstable income.

As the years went on, they realized the communities they lived in were no different from what they witnessed in their native country. Street crimes, homicides, robberies, and violence within their own communities reminded them of what they tried to escape from in their homelands. These communities consisted of different ethnic groups also trying to move up in society, and this caused conflicts, thus contributing to the current Cambodian youth gang problem. These new immigrants, struggling to survive are faced with internal family problems due to the transition to the American way of life and the racial conflicts from other ethnic groups in their community.

Mental Health and Family

Although they continue to strive towards success in this country, they still have unresolved grief and loss. “Many of the survivors were scarred physically and psychologically by what they had gone through.” (Chandler, 1991, p. 236). Many Cambodian refugees suffer from mental health conditions, specifically Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can adversely affect their children. Many Cambodian adults have high expectations for their children to succeed in America. They want their children to be successful for themselves and provide for the family but do not realize that this pressure can force their kids into rebellion. There is a projection of their own deficit, which is placed on their children.
Parents’ Struggles

Forced into a country with a whole new set of values, beliefs, and government system can be tremendously difficult for anyone trying to learn and adapt in the new environment. The Cambodian refugees came to America with their own way of thinking and living and had to transition into a different type of lifestyle. Most of these refugees had strong cultural beliefs and had difficulties altering their beliefs. Some of the cultural practices often conflicted with American values and laws, and this made it difficult for Cambodian parents to be confident in maintaining their family dynamics and their functioning.

Cultural Conflict-Bi-cultural Household

The major issue that continues to arise for Cambodian refugee parents is culture clash. Cambodian parents strongly implement their traditional culture and value systems in their family, generating conflicts with their children’s Americanized values. Some cultural practices that are considered norms within the Cambodian community are frowned upon by the Western society resulting in issues of assimilation and conflicts within Cambodian households. These refugee parents are unprepared to manage a bi-cultural household, so they are forced to deal with unexpected issues and changes.

Language Barriers

Language barriers and lack of bi-lingual professionals have led to underutilization of public assistance and other services by Cambodian refugees. Most Cambodians came to the United States obtaining public assistance because of their lack of education and work experiences needed for quality jobs. It took a while for
Cambodian refugees to learn the system and obtain these resources but many still do not know all of the services available to them such as mental health services.

Based on statistics, there is a drastic underutilization of mental health services amongst the Cambodian community. In addition to the unfamiliarity of this offered service, strong cultural influences and beliefs also contribute to this underutilization. “They tend to underuse existing services except those that are culturally appropriate and linguistically compatible” (Lin & Cheung, 1999). Cambodian Americans believe that there are other factors contributing to mental health conditions. Factors such as spirits or voodoo are believed to cause mental health symptoms. Many Cambodian refugees have a hard time understanding the biological, psychological, and sociological influence on a person’s mental health condition and feel that it is unthinkable to admit to being “crazy.”

The lack of understanding and underutilization of services show that the Cambodian population is trying to assimilate into the American society. Slowly but surely, as the generations progress, the population will be more assimilated into the American society which is evident with the newer generations of the Cambodian community. Although the Cambodian elders are struggling to adapt, their children are rapidly learning the American values and practices and are able to educate and assist their parents.

Discipline

Commonly, Cambodian families continue to implement their culture and practices to the newer generations even if it is against the law. Samkhann Khoeun (2003) talks about the Cambodian way of discipline and how it needs to be changed so that it could meet the standards of the Western society’s laws. “They have a completely different way
of disciplining the children. And so you get no support from the mainstream community. Parents need to relearn parenting skills, especially the skills practiced in the mainstream society” (p. 156).

In Cambodia, physical punishment is a common form of discipline, but in the United States; it is a form of child “mistreatment.” “For example, physical punishment such as twisting ears, pinching the face, kicking and beating, and hitting the head are acceptable forms of child rearing practices in many Asian groups. However, these acts are viewed by the Western child welfare system as abusive” (Keo, 2002, chap. 2). In America, child abuse laws challenge the parent’s knowledge of child rearing and create difficulties with parent child relationships.

Medicinal Practice
Another common practice utilized by the Cambodian community is traditional medicinal practices, which is typically taboo in the American culture. Cambodians practice spiritual rituals, such as a healing practice known as “coining,” where a coin is used in conjunction with tiger balm, a form of healing ointment, to scrape a person’s back, leaving bruises along the ribs. This allows the balm to cool a person’s body, assisting in the healing process, when they are sick. This method of healing has been practiced by my family and other Cambodian families for many generations. “Coining does leave bruise marks, however, and these can alarm medical personnel and others not familiar with this practice” (Bankston, n.d., sec. 4). Many social workers claim this practice is harmful and try to prevent parents from practicing on their children.
Power Shift

Challenged by American laws, values, and the adaptation into the culture, Cambodian parents lose a sense of power in this society. Not understanding the government system and not being able to communicate with professionals, Cambodian parents are relying on their children to communicate and provide them with linguistic support and services and this causes a power shift from the parents to the children. It is common that these parents rely on their children for linguistic support at various locations such as the social security office, hospital, and educational system.

Bi-culturally competent children gain more power and some do take advantage of the cultural conflict their parents endure by using it against their parents. Some children rebel against their parents because they feel that their parents cannot offer them support or anything useful towards assimilation and this creates a disconnection. When they need help on a subject in school, some parents are not capable of doing so because they are illiterate in the English language.

Other than urging their children to stay in school and to avoid gangs, these Khmer has great trouble providing the persistent parental reinforcement so vital for all children’s academic success. Most parents also neglect to provide the necessary resources for their children’s school projects or homework; they do not buy books or materials, set aside a space for their children to work, or insist that the television be turned off during specific study hours (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 94).

It is not the parents’ fault for struggling to provide for their families. They are dealing with their own issues of assimilation and struggles in this society that cause them
to subconsciously neglect their children. They do not mean to do so, but they do not have the time or the specific knowledge to provide for their children in this society where there are a lot of expectations from American parents.

The children of Cambodian refugees do not fully understand the experience and the struggles their parents went through and are going through in order to survive in this country. Cambodian parents are trying to adapt and learn the system so that they can be successful and sufficiently provide their children with better opportunities to live comfortably. The children interpret this as their parents being uneducated, incompetent, and unable to provide for them. They do not take into consideration that their parents are forced to adapt to a whole new and “unfamiliar” country. They take their parents for granted and do not fully understand their parent’s experience bringing them to the United States. “Many parents noted that they felt powerless in front of their children, because they were busy making ends meet and had little time or knowledge of how their children were doing at school or with whom they were socializing” (Huff, 2002, p. 230).

Being occupied with their own struggles of trying to live and support their family, refugee parents display a “negligent” behavior as interpreted by their children, and this causes the children to have negative feelings towards their parents. The disconnection results in family bonding issues, thus leading these youths to resorting to other forms of support. These conflicts also result in family members acquiring negative habits such as gambling, physical discipline, or even gang membership.
Theoretical Orientation: Ecological Perspective

In order to fully understand the behavior and specific factors that influence Cambodian youths to join gangs, we must examine the Cambodian at-risk youth population from an ecological perspective. An ecological perspective focuses on interdependent relationships that exist between a person and his or her environment. In the relationship between a person and the environment, both mutually influence one another, which contribute to the process of human development. This perspective aims to explain that an individual is affected by transactions with multiple systems on a micro, mezzo, and macro level.

Macro Level Community

On a macro level, it is important to recognize the community factors that contribute towards a culture of violence consisting of housing, the media, education, and the lack of afterschool prevention programs. Most of these ethnic at-risk youths have grown up living in urban areas with high poverty and crime rates. The ecological perspective would say that in living in this type of environment; these youths are frequently interacting with violence that contributes to violent behavior. These youths begin to adapt this violent behavior because they see it as a norm in their everyday lives. They are surrounded by this type of environment and do not have other resources around them to teach them “acceptable behavior,” so they continue to act in improper ways and internalize it as acceptable behavior. “These refugees lacked basic skills and had difficulty coping with the demands of their new environment. Most refugees could only gain housing in poor neighborhoods where daily life was ruled by gang warfare and a
drug subculture” (Vorabouth, 2000, p. 3). Living in this type of environment has a negative influence on the youth because they are constantly exposed to crime, drugs, and violence. More than likely, youths that are heavily exposed to these factors will resort to gangs and violence as a means of protection as well as gain.

Macro Level Educational System

In addition to witnessing violence in their community, the ecological perspective would claim that the educational system is a major contributing factor towards youths’ behavioral development. Most schools are funded through various taxes which mean that richer neighborhoods will have more funding for their schools and allow for better, more qualified teachers with higher wages. The richer schools will also have more funding for a variety of programs as well as stronger academic programs such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses that give students better development of education and opportunities for success.

On the other hand, the majority of at-risk youths live in low-income neighborhoods where they are zoned to attend lower-valued schools with limited resources and less qualified teachers. Furthermore, because many youth gang members are also happen to attend these schools, Cambodian youths are forced to be around this type of environment in the school system. Initially, these at-risk youths usually envision the school system as a safe haven to escape the harsh realities of their lives, away from the usual gang-infested neighborhoods. Instead, they witness the exact same environment in school as they do in their neighborhood. Youth violence and gangs are not, to an extent, fully comparable to violence in the neighborhood, but its presence can
be felt on school grounds and is acknowledged by the students and staff. To these students, the environment makes no difference, because they always feel pressure to protect themselves from threats by other youths. Again, the additional interaction with violence and negative behavior within the school system continues the effect on a youth’s development.

Mezzo Level Family-Discipline

On a mezzo level, the ecological perspective would state that family can also contribute to negative behavior and gang membership. At the family level, it is important to recognize the dynamics, specifically parenting techniques, as it relates to violence and negative behavior. Family discipline practices, whether physical or verbal, is a major factor that contributes to a youth’s violent behavior. In some homes, physical abuse such as “spanking” is utilized to discipline children. This form of discipline is supposed to teach the youth that they should not do certain things and threatens that they should change or else get spanked. The problem with this form of discipline is it sends a hidden message to the youth informing them that it is acceptable to engage in physical force in order to promote change. Research evidence has suggested that youth who have been physically abused are more likely to commit a violent crime later on in their life (Proposition 49, 2002).

Besides physical abuse, verbal abuse can also have a negative effect on the youth. A child that is constantly told that he or she is “bad” will begin to believe it. This mentality can take a toll on the youth by deteriorating self esteem and can also lead to violent behavior. It is crucial that parents are aware of their actions and interact with
their children in a positive manner. Their negative actions, in addition to the lack of parental interaction and involvement with the youth, will lead to violent and negative behavior. By being involved in the negative acts of his or her parents, the youth will feel a disconnection with the family that can result in longing for other means of closeness, such as gang membership.

Mezzo Level Lack of Parental Guidance

The parents’ struggles, and often failed, of being bi-culturally competent, makes Cambodian teens feel their parents are inadequate, which leads family bonding issues. Receiving minimal support from their parents and the longing for close family, young Cambodian teens struggle with the feeling of intimidation in our society choose the gang path as an alternative. “Plus, they’re not getting the support at home with homework, that kind of thing. So they get discouraged. They drop out, they join a gang” (Khoeun, 2003, p. 135). Having been forced into neighborhoods that are crime and drug-infested, Cambodian teens are easily influenced by this gang culture. As depicted in the documentary, “Bui Doi: Life like Dust,” Cambodian and Vietnamese gang members organize themselves like extended families (Rothenberg & Mishan, 1993). These youths enjoy the company in gangs because they cannot find it anywhere else. They soon realize that it is not the right path to go and unfortunately, it is already too late. Some of these Cambodian youths end up dead or in jail before they can realize that they chose the wrong path. “Youth join these gangs for many reasons: to belong to something, for hope of protection, for status, to make money, to supply a parent with drugs (most frequently
their mother), or to be the man of the house while the father was in prison” (Schmidt & O’Reilly, 2007, pp. 21-22).

These youths, living in broken families and bad neighborhoods, feel the need to find their own family closeness and protection since they cannot get it from their biological families. The conflicts within the household are more stressful for the youths and create a lack of familial support but something they receive from the gangs. Some youths actually feel a stronger sense of belonging with their gang family rather than with their biological family.

Furthermore, youths living in drug-infested low income neighborhoods are required to associate themselves with gangs to protect themselves from other ethnic gangs. Their gang membership not only provides them with acceptance and support, but people to turn to when they feel threatened. This causes them to become stuck in the lifestyle and explains the tremendous influence gangs have on the youths.

Micro Level Self-Confidence and Esteem

Keeping the macro and mezzo level factors in mind, it helps us understand the micro level factors that influence a youth’s negative behavior. Clearly, the environment, community, family, and gangs can influence a youth’s behavior, and this can help explain how their self-esteem and identity is affected on a micro level. As mentioned above, youths are forced to overcome adversities in their lives, and they have to change their priorities and goals to help their family survive in this country. By working instead of obtaining education, they lose purpose and belief in a positive future for themselves. They are expected to support the family while neglecting their personal achievements in
life, and this reduces self-esteem. On top of low self-esteem, they also suffer from an identity crisis. The majority of these youths are from ethnic households where they are required to understand two different cultures, which causes confusion and isolation, making it harder for them to create their own identity.

Historical Analysis of Asian Gangs

In order to fully understand the Cambodian youth gang population, it is important to recognize the history of Asian gangs in the United States. Through the early waves of immigration, early Asian groups consisted of immigrant groups from countries such as China, Japan, Korea, India, and the Philippines. Upon arriving to the United States in hopes of building a legacy for their family, they competed with other race groups for employment and resources. Through this rough transition into the American society, Asian groups were discriminated against and suffered racial tension from other ethnic groups and gangs. “All of the gang members indicated that after their arrival in the United States, they were verbally harassed and physically abused by many different groups at school and in their neighborhoods” (Mark, 2004, p.147).

Specifically, the Chinese group alleviated this issue by establishing their first major Chinese community in San Francisco called Chinatown in the late 19th century. They used this community as a way to come together and share familiar resources typically used by their people. This enclave also allowed them to have a stronger voice and more power to fend off violence from other ethnic groups. Chinatown, at the time, was controlled by an adult organization called Tongs that formed as a mutual support and protection group. After establishing themselves as a dominant force in the community,
they proceeded with illegal operations in the community as a means of monetary gains. The Tongs hired youth gang members known as “hatchet men” to protect their illegal operations and to protect the community from outside threats. After the gang members were able to gain power and respect, they used this power and eventually turned on their own people for gain (Chin, 2000). “Police estimate that at least 80 percent to 90 percent of Chinese businesses have to pay one or more gangs regularly or occasionally” (Chin, 2001, p. 139). A violence-oriented gang, initially started to protect themselves and the members of their community, turned into a profit-oriented gang feeding off their own community.

This gang pattern persists even in today’s Asian youth gangs. From the experiences of the early Asian gangs such as the Tongs, the practices trickled down to the newly arrived Southeast Asian population. The Chinese dominated their community and others for a while, and then, the Southeast Asians arrived to learn their processes. With the influx of Southeast Asians in the United States, the Southeast Asian population was able to establish themselves in various parts of the country and continued this “gang pattern” that the Chinese were able to accomplish.

Cambodian Youth Gangs

Similar to the first Chinese youth gang in America, Cambodian youth gangs initially formed as a way to come together to protect themselves from other ethnic groups. They were forced to live in low income communities because of minimal finances where the crime rate was generally higher. This new population was exposed to frequent transgressions and violence by other ethnic groups in the community. “Theories of
poverty, lack of social opportunities, and racism often interacted with social (and personal) disorganization to explain the involvement of the youth gangs and their members in illegal gain-oriented behavior” (Spergel, 2007, p. 27). Through these misfortunes, this group came together as a protection group but then moved from violence-oriented groups to profit-oriented groups, preying on people in their own communities.

Although the pattern is common, the experience is different. The main difference between Southeast Asian gangs and mainstream gangs is the migration experience. This migration experience included the witnessing of violence and the partaking in traumatic events while fleeing from the war-torn country of Cambodia. Throughout the migration process, this violence became normalized because of the constant exposure disturbing events. Survival mentality from their home country transfers over and is evident through their actions, as they now worry constantly about threats from other ethnic groups.

**Bonus Life**

For the first Cambodian youths that immigrated to the United States and lived in the “war zone”-type communities, they transferred their mentality and experiences to protect themselves and their families. Some Cambodian youths had the mentality that they are living a “bonus life” because they were able to escape death during the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge regime and believed their lives are a surplus. To better understand this “bonus life,” it is easy to compare it to the frame of mind of a gambler. A gambler goes to the casino with 50 dollars and wins 250 dollars. The 200 dollars gained is a surplus that can be wasted. The same analogy applies to the Cambodian youths who
endured the traumatic experiences of the war. This surplus leads to a mentality of not being afraid to die. The extremely violent behavior among the Cambodian youth gang population can be easily recognized by understanding this concept.

They engage in ruthless activities and commit crimes that are unbelievable even to other gang members (The History Channel, 2008). These gang members are ruthless because they rob and kill with the simple intent of scaring future victims to give into their demands. Commonly, Cambodian youth gang members are excessive with murder to show future victims that they are serious and resolute when they make demands during their gang activities. This reputation of being ruthless leads victims to surrender what they have and allow these criminals to do as they please, without the involvement of law enforcement. “Part of this increase can be attributed to the reluctance of communities and people to report to authorities or outsiders the extent of gang crime or activity” (Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006, p. 85). Victims, and even the members of their community, are sometimes scared to report these incidences in fear of the Cambodian youth gang members targeting them again. This empowers the gang youths to continue their gang activities.

Afterschool Programs-Background

Statistics show that youth crime in California peaks during the hours of 2:00 PM-6:00 PM. “Because of the absence of adult supervision, these are also the peak hours for drug use, smoking, teen sex, and car crashes involving teens” (O’Sullivan, 2001). Since most guardians are at work during these hours, there is no way to monitor their children, thus leaving these children stranded in the community to pick up bad habits.
When gangs exist in a community, they can seriously impact schools, as they become recruitment centers and as gang territory. As a result of a gang’s presence, belonging to the organization is a type of self-protection, at times, employed by students in response to the threatening school and community environments. To combat this issue, it is essential to not only occupy a youth’s time during these hours through afterschool programs but to also utilize this time to help mold these individuals in a positive manner through prevention and intervention activities.

Afterschool Program

Afterschool programs allow youths an opportunity to learn new trades, and some educate youths about different jobs that are available to them. Research shows that afterschool programs cut crime, gang participation and drug use and increase school success (Malhi, 2002). Without afterschool programs that educate and occupy youths’ time, impoverished youths are forced to participate in activities that do not necessarily challenge them both physically and mentally in a positive manner. As a result, some youths end up spending time with members in their community who promote negative behaviors. If we had more programs available then these youths could gain different and better outlooks on life.

There are many benefits of afterschool programs besides the decrease in crime and drug-use for our youths. Children and youth can feel a sense of security since they are around mentors who are required to monitor their safety. Their leisure time will not be on the streets or in the community and will be focused on building connections with their peers and holding positions to assist in leadership building. Many children and
youths prefer attending afterschool programs as a way to escape the cruel realities, stressors, and harm at home, as well. “This country needs more prevention and intervention programs to tackle the problem of crime before it spread, especially with regard to the rapid increase of gangs” (Mark, 2004, p. 19). The reduction of these negative acts as a result of afterschool programs will contribute to a safer environment for everyone, and progress towards building productive citizens for society.

For high-risk demographic groups that do receive afterschool funding and whose youth attend the programs, the effectiveness of the program is evident in the results. Statistics show not only the decrease in crime activity and drug use but also an improvement in academic achievement at school.

“Also for middle school students in terms of grade point average, while overall middle school GPAs declined by .04 points, students who attend the afterschool program for 90 days or more show an increase in their GPA at statistically significant levels” (Increase academic, 2010).

These underprivileged groups, such as minorities, are the most important groups to focus on because of the increased crime rate in these communities and the lack of academic achievement.

The youths involved in afterschool programs will receive positive support that they did not have prior to entering into the program. Not only will the youth in these communities benefit from the program, but society as a whole will also benefit because the reduction of youth gangs will make neighborhoods safer, property values will be more stabilized (less vandalism), the healthcare system will be more productive (less
emergency room visits due to youth violence), and less money will be taken from taxpayers. These programs are “saving taxpayers $3 for every $1 invested through reduced costs for juvenile crime, grade repetition, and remedial education.” (Proposition 49, 2002). Lastly, afterschool programs can benefit our society because it shines light on unique populations such as the Southeast Asian youth gang population and put direct focus on this issue before it gets too big.
Chapter 3

METHODS

Study Design

The purpose of this study is to explore factors contributing to gang-related activities among Southeast Asian youth and how our society can find alternatives to help reduce youth gang involvement and increase educational attainment. The study is designed to target ex-gang members and professionals who have had extensive experience with this population and impart knowledge on some activities or program ideas that can help transition these youths out of the gang mindset and environment. The design of the study is a survey research using a questionnaire and an interview guide, simultaneously. The procedure of the study consists of a questionnaire that was handed out during a face-to-face interview or mailed out via postal service to subjects living outside of Sacramento, CA. The face-to-face interviews were done in their home or in a secure location suggested by the interviewee. Participants also requested to have the interview done by phone.

Subjects

Participants of this study included a specific group of people from the Northern California region with extensive but diverse knowledge of Southeast Asian youth gangs and violence. Two groups were interviewed during the research study. The first group consisted of five Southeast Asian ex-gang members that were recruited through personal contact and snowball strategy. When recruiting these ex-gang members, the researcher had to take into consideration their validity through testimonials that their ex-gang
member status was official. These youths have left gang affiliation for at least three years, and have transitioned out of the gangs safely, and are able to live normal, productive lives. The second group included 5 legal and educational professionals, recruited through personal contact, who have experience working with Southeast Asian youth gangs. They include law enforcement officers and directors/counselors. They were chosen because of their different perspectives and their personal knowledge and experiences with alleviating this social issue.

Procedure

Prior to each interview, an informed consent was either handed out or sent via postal service to each subject participating in the study (See Appendix A). Every consent form required a signature acknowledging that the subjects read the terms and conditions and approved to be interviewed for the research study. After the consent form was signed, the survey questionnaire and interview guide were used to gather information about the subject’s experiences with Southeast Asian youth gangs.

The interview process for the ex-gang members and professionals were slightly different. With the ex-gang members, the first participant I interviewed was a referral and had frequent contact with the rest of the interviewed ex-gang members. The first interview was conducted in the ex-gang member’s home while the remainder of the ex-gang member interviews were conducted over the phone. The forms were given to the referral to give to the other ex-gang members and after they were signed, it was given back to the researcher by the referral.

For the professionals, all of the interviews were conducted face-to-face besides
one interview with the law enforcement officer from Stockton, California. The interview with the officer was conducted over the phone and documents were received electronically through email. The interview process was tremendously difficult to arrange with these professionals because most of them were busy and took a while to respond when contacted by the researcher.

There were no incentives provided during the interview process which made it difficult to set up these interviews. Some of the ex-gang members asked if they were going to receive honorariums but the researcher explained that this is for the betterment of their community. In addition to community benefits, Participant Number One is an acquaintance of the researcher and this allowed for more willingness from the other ex-gang members to participate in the study, out of respect to Participant Number One. The professionals did not ask about or expect gratuity, but probably led to their lack of interest or engagement in the research study.

Data Collection Instruments

There was one survey questionnaire for all subjects throughout the research study. The survey was handed out to the participants to be completed along with a consent form acknowledging the approval of participation in the study. The survey consists of eight questions. The first half focuses on the subject’s experiences with Southeast Asian youth gangs and their knowledge on the uniqueness of Southeast Asian youth gangs compared to gangs of other ethnicities. The second half of the survey centers on the subject’s familiarity with factors resulting in youth gang involvement and recommendations of preventive and intervention ideas to help Southeast Asian youths
transition out of youth gangs. The use of this survey evokes that there is minimal risk to the interviewees, with the consideration that the only type of risk is the emotional risk, or slight discomfort that can be caused by the remembrance of past experiences evoked by the questions.

In addition to the survey, a two-part interview-guide was used to collect information regarding the two different types of interaction with Southeast Asian youth gangs. The first part of the questionnaire is for professionals who have worked with Southeast Asian youth gang members will focus on their knowledge of the areas with high concentrations of Southeast Asian youth gangs and societal costs, factors contributing towards involvement, and forms of prevention. The second part of the questionnaire is for ex-gang members and this section focuses on the subject’s experience with joining a gang, leaving a gang, and transitioning from gang culture to building a professional career.

The data collection tools were developed to obtain extensive information regarding the factors contributing towards youth gang involvement, difficulties working with the Cambodian youth gang population, and prevention and intervention strategies. The questions were created based on the researcher’s hypothesis and the current literature available about the Cambodian youth gang population. The validity of the questions was reviewed by California State University, Sacramento’s graduate studies department and was also supported by literature.

During the interview process, the researcher thoroughly went through each question and elaborated on the questions if the interviewees became confused or unsure
about how to answer each question. When an interviewee became uncomfortable or did not want to answer a certain question, the question was either revisited at the end of the interview or omitted. For some interviews, the interviewee preferred to not be interviewed and wanted to fill out the questionnaire at their own pace, and if questions arose, the author was present to provide clarification.

Protection of Human Subjects

The standard definition of minimal risk is when “the probability and magnitude of the harm or discomfort encountered during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.” Based on the standard definition, my study is considered a minimal risk because there were no type of harm or discomfort encountered by the subjects and because the anticipated risks posed by the research are no more than those encountered in daily life. For the professionals, this is about their everyday work and activities, and for ex gang members who are currently living a productive life, this study reflects their past identity and experiences which they have handled properly. The participation of subjects in the study was strictly voluntary, and they were able to refuse participation or withdrawal from the study at anytime.

The level of risk for this research study is considered minimal. The subject’s rights to privacy and safety were protected. With ex-gang members as subjects, it was crucial to maintain confidentiality of the information obtained from the subjects being interviewed. As a safety procedure, real names were not written on documents pertaining to the study. Pseudonyms may be used to distinguish participants to provide the research with clarity of specific positions and roles. As the researcher, I did not include any
incriminating information. My study is focused on finding information or recommendations of activities and programs to help get youth gang members out of gangs and not about their personal lives or past experiences. The information received from my subjects was for the sole purpose of youth program development and is destroyed after the study is complete.
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Descriptive Data Analysis

The goal of this research project is to gather information about the factors contributing towards gang-related activities amongst Southeast Asian youths. It also aims to identify effective prevention and intervention approaches that can help this critical social issue. A review of literature about this social issue suggests that community, family’s refugee experience, family support, acculturation, and self-identity heavily influence Cambodian youths. Data collected through this study reflects the perspectives of the Cambodian youth gang population and the issues they encounter growing up in the United States.

In this research study, a survey questionnaire containing eight questions in conjunction with a two-part interview guide was used (See Appendix B). Part A of the interview guide is for the professionals that had experiences with the Cambodian youth gang population (See Appendix C). This guide focuses on their knowledge about Cambodian youth gangs and it associated problems. Part B of the interview guide is for the Cambodian ex-gang members and information about their reasons for joining a gang and their motivation to leave the gang and succeed in becoming gainfully employed (See Appendix D).

The data obtained from the survey questionnaire is presented into themes: (1) demographics, (2) uniqueness of Cambodian youth gangs, (3) factors contributing to
youth gang membership, (4) societal costs, and (5) recommendations for Cambodian youth to get out of gangs.

It is important to understand the nature and therefore, the limitations of the study. The topic of the research study requires that the author is sensitive about the information and emphasizes confidentiality with the subjects. Some subjects withdrew from the interview based on their own personal reasons, while some had informed the author about safety precautions to take when finding ex-gang members because of their lack of trust about research regarding their population.

Demographics

A total of 10 participants residing in Northern California were surveyed during this research study consisting of 50% (n=5) male Cambodian ex-gang members and 50% (n=5) professionals that had over 3 years of experience with the Cambodian youth gang population. Of the 5 professionals, 30% (n=3) of the participants are males and 20% (n=2) are females with careers as managing director, prevention specialist, youth program manager, and law enforcement officers. The ex-gang members are all males with careers as a youth coordinator, student, automotive technician, truck driver, and freelancer. The average age of the participants is 26.3 years of age and the average number of years of experience with Cambodian youth gangs among all participants is 15 years. A distribution of the demographic information is listed in Table 1.

The most intriguing information obtained from the demographic portion of the interview is the background among all of the ex-gang members. All five ex-gang members grew up in crime and gang-infested low income neighborhoods and had family
members in youth gangs and they all experienced discrimination and threats from other ethnic groups in the area.

Table 1

*Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Yrs of knowledge w/ Cambodian gangs</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Youth Coordinator</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ex-Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ex-Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Automotive Tech</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ex-Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Truck Driver</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Ex-Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Freelancer</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Ex-Gang member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Prevention Specialist</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Law Enforcement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the experiences of living in these low income projects, there is an intergenerational influence experienced by these youths. Many of their family members were in gangs, and they were exposed to the gang culture through social learning. This is consistent with the study’s hypothesis and the current literature that one of the ecological factors is that an individual is influenced on the macro and mezzo levels, by the community in which he or she lives in and the people they associate with everyday.

The literature review suggests that youths in impoverished areas have to worry about potential harm and injuries because of gang presence. They are being forced to use
violence to fend off future violence. This type of violence occurs if their integrity and strength is in question by members of their community and by family members who promote negative norms perceived as valid by the youths. An end result for youths who grow up accepting false and hazardous norms, is the perpetuation of violent crimes in a community. This can lead to false ideologies being passed down from generation to generation, and the lack of motivation for youths to attend school especially if these youths do not see or learn about the benefits from their community.

The majority of the ex-gang members reflect on the effects of environment and their gang involvement. In regards to family members on a mezzo level, a lot of these youth’s family members are associated with a gang, and because their family members are gang members, these youth’s are automatically tailored, and trained to join the gang their family members are a part of.

Moreover, by seeing and hearing the aspects that their family members who are in gangs relay to them, which may include some form of respect or what gang members deem as respect in their community or money from drug transactions, these youths see this type of living as acceptable because family members did not relay to them the unlawful and unethical viewpoint of gangs. When one reflects on how close some family members can be to the youths in question, it is understandable how easily it will be for youths to adapt this unconstructive and harmful lifestyle. For example, if a youth’s older brother has a lot of gang members around their immediate environment and these gang members show a youth how to interact with male and females, how to obey and break some laws, and how they are suppose to live, then that youth will not know of other more
beneficial avenues, thus causing the youth to believe that the gang lifestyle is the only correct way to live.

How Are Cambodian Youth Gangs Different From Other Ethnic Youth Gangs?

All 10 respondents expressed that Cambodian youth gangs differ from other ethnic youth gangs mainly because of their families’ refugee experience and gender expectations. The ex-gang members stated in the survey questionnaire that the severity of violence, nature of crime, and socioeconomic status were least important when distinguishing Cambodian youth gangs from other ethnic gangs but 40% (n=4) of the participants, all professionals, thought otherwise. Although the majority (N=8), or 80% of the participants, agreed that refugee experience makes the Cambodian youth population unique and (N=9) or 90% of the participants agreed that gender expectations also makes this population distinctive, only 40% (n=4) agreed that severity of violence and nature of crime made this population different from other ethnic groups.

During the interviews, the ex-gang members talked about their family’s history, the adversities they faced while immigrating to the United States, and how the trauma and normalized violence affected their family’s success in America. The lack of resources due to cultural and language barriers also caused their families to struggle in their new environment and negatively influenced their upbringing. Struggling to survive in a new society, the refugees relied on their children to strive and provide various forms of support to meet the family’s basic needs.

The violence and gender issues are also unique for this population. The ex-gang members talked about their roles as Cambodian males and their parent’s expectation from
them to uphold and maintain the household. The respondents reported that as males in the household, they were expected to live up to their cultural gender expectations or else they would dishonor the family. They were faced with the pressure to provide for the family financially while juggling other priorities in their lives, including obtaining an education. They were also expected to be dominant and successful because they are supposed to be the breadwinners to support their current and future families. Some practices mentioned by the ex-gang member include the gender inequality that occurs in the household. “Girls are held back and encouraged to internalize rather than express feelings and desires, while boys are empowered to become strong and powerful” (Keo, 2002, chap. 2). They claimed that the females in the household do not have to deal with the pressures to financially provide for the family, receive more affection than the males and are held to a higher standard for educational attainment. Although the males had more freedom to do as they pleased, they lacked the guidance and nurturance that the females received from their parents. These factors, reported by the ex-gang members, all distinguished the Cambodian youth gang population from other ethnic gangs.

There was a clear distinction between the answers from Group A (the ex-gang members) and Group B (the professionals). Group A chose to converse more about the refugee experience and gender expectations while Group B chose to talk more about the nature of crime and severity of violence of Cambodian youth gangs. A total of 30% (n=3) of the professionals interviewed believe that Cambodian youth gang members are more aggressive when it comes to committing crimes compared to other ethnic groups because of their “do or die” attitude. “They are very violent and have nothing to lose, especially
when they have nothing to show for” (Participant 8-Program Manager). Similarly, a law enforcement officer said:

In the gang world, this pride makes the Cambodian youth gang the most ruthless among the Southeast Asian gangs, as their numbers are far fewer than their Vietnamese and Chinese counterparts. The sense of being outnumbered can cause a Cambodian gang community to act out more aggressively than their rivals (Participant 9- law enforcement officer).

As mentioned in the literature review, Cambodian youth gang members have the mentality that they are living a bonus life. Similar to the bonus life, the statements made by the professionals support the literature because they talk about the Cambodian youths as having “nothing to lose” and willing to go above and beyond to accomplish their goals, be it positive or negative. With that said, the professionals suggest that with the “do or die” attitude, these Cambodian gang members are tremendously violent when engaging in crime. “Although both groups have been involved in gang violence, one group is at greater risk of entering a world of robberies, shootings, rapes and homicide” (Tan, 2000, par. 1). They engage in an unorganized crime nature and are not afraid to kill to set an example for future victims that they are serious.

Factors Contributing to Cambodian Youth Gang Involvement

More specifically, the participants in this research universally agreed that the refugee experience is the main contributing factor for the Southeast Asian youth gang problem. The participants also agreed that poverty, urban living, acculturation and family conflicts were a result of the refugee experience. A total 100% (n=10) of the participants
stated that poverty and urban living contributed, and 90% \((n=9)\) of the participants revealed that acculturation and family conflicts also played a role in the Cambodian youth gang problem. Chart 1 displays the breakdown of the factors stated by the participants and their agreement with each specific factor.

**Ex-Gang Member’s Perspective**

The ex-gang members \((n=5)\) of the study respondents have stated that their family’s refugee experience had significantly influenced their involvement with gangs. Although they were not directly affected by the transition into the United States, they suffered through the negative repercussions that occurred thereafter. Because the refugee experience was tremendously difficult for Cambodian refugees, they gave their undivided attention towards survival and establishing a new life in this new country. During the transition, the parents had to hold several low paying jobs and seek out additional resources to support the family and this took time away from supervising their children. Often times, the interaction with the children consisted of asking for help with linguistic support or paperwork and not about affection or academics. Some of the youth gang members reported that they regularly felt discouraged about school work because their parents could not help them when they needed academic support. With the lack of academic, financial, and emotional support, they experienced a disconnection from their parents and attached to any type of support they found which included gang membership and the resources that were provided within the gang culture. In addition to the intergenerational influences by family members that were in gangs, they found gang
leaders who were able to teach them the path towards “success,” which motivated them to pursue the gang lifestyle.

All of the participants (n=10) agreed that acculturation and belonging difficulties were related to the refugee experience and 80% (n=8) stated that protection from other ethnic gangs was also a key factor. All of the ex-gang members interviewed reported that they first joined a gang at the average age of 12.8, when acculturation caused complications and conflicts in the household.

During the interviews, ex-gang members all identified a common reason for them joining a youth gang. They felt that the acculturation difficulties experienced in the household lead to a disconnection with the family forcing them to find other outlets for bonding. These ex-gang members grew up in households where Cambodian cultural practices and values were implemented by the adults onto the children. Faced with the pressures of having a bi-cultural lifestyle in these households, these ex-gang members who are more acculturated to American culture than their parents are, often rejected their parent’s beliefs and practices. They developed their own way of thinking and behaving acquired through the academic and community settings, which conflicted with their parents values and beliefs, and this created conflicts in the household.

Findings from current research and literature support the observation that cultural practices utilized by the immigrant adults are often denied and frowned upon by the American society. At the same time, immigrant youths tend to side with the American value and belief system. Some youths, oblivious of their parent’s struggles, rebel against their parents to gain power and freedom to do as they please. This causes the parents to
lose a sense of power and control over their children, resulting in numerous stressors in their lives that contribute to instability in the household. Along with the pressure to succeed and support the family, these youths had to change their life priorities around and play adult roles in their household to fulfill their family’s needs, even over their own. As with the ex-gang members that were interviewed, these experiences and conflicts caused a disconnection with their parents leading them to seek other forms of family bonding. “I was closer to my childhood friends than my blood family, so we created our own family (Gang) to feel a sense of belonging” ‘we were like blood brothers that formed a close bond” (Participant 5- ex gang member).

![Figure 1. Factors Contributing to Youth Gang Membership](image)

In addition to the lack of family support, these ex-gang members stated that they felt that their family did not understand their experiences away from home. On top of
feeling the pressure to provide for the family, these ex-gang members were dealing with threats from other ethnic groups while trying to focus on education and financial obligations for the family.

When my family came to the United States, the government put us in the ghetto. My parents didn’t understand at the time that the Black people in the neighborhood did not like us. We were getting jumped just for being Asian. At that point, I had to join a gang for protection and also to make a stand that Asian people should not get picked on. I joined a gang to show those Black people or anybody that if they rob us, we will find out and get them back because we’re not scared (Participant 2- ex gang member).

A total of 80% (n=8) of the participants agrees that protection is one of the major factors affecting youth gang membership, while 10% (n=1) disagrees and 10% (n=1) chose not to answer. The participant that disagreed is a law enforcement officer who adamantly feels that the lack of proper adult guidance is the main reason for youth gang involvement by these Cambodian youths.

Professional’s Perspective

All of the professionals (n=5) also agreed that the refugee experience was the initial problem influencing Cambodian youths to join gangs but focused more on the lack of proper adult guidance as a factor. “There is a lack of mentors and adults who can give these kids the opportunity to succeed” (Participant 8- program manager). Comparably, a prevention specialist said:
The professionals that work as prevention program managers and coordinators suggest that these youths lack the adult and mentor guidance at home and strive to seek it elsewhere. “The lack of family involvement in the new surrounds and misunderstanding of the youth are factors along with confusion and conflicts with family roles and responsibilities” (Participant 7- prevention specialist).

The immigration process to the United States led Cambodian refugee families to experience economic challenges and a deficit to resources, which most often resulted in the lack of basic needs being fulfilled in these households. These youths felt helpless and found their own sources of income and resources through gang leaders that will help them pave the “path towards success.”

Economic Benefits

A total of 60% (n=6) participants, 50% (n=5) professionals and 10% (n=1) ex-gang members, agreed that economic benefits contributed towards youth gang involvement while 30% (n=3) of the participants disagreed and 10% (n=1) chose not to answer. The 30% (n=3) that disagreed were the ex-gang members, and they insisted that economic benefits were not the sole reason for joining a youth gang while all of the professionals 50% (n=5) said that economic benefits was a reason. Most of the professionals felt that the youth’s initial intention of joining the gang is for economic gain. Their examples for backing up these claims includes that often times the youth are involved criminal activities such as selling drugs, robberies, invasions, and grand theft auto. “The combination of low government funding and racist experiences from their communities can also add to Cambodian youth resorting to street gangs, first to protect
themselves, and then forming into a source of personal income” (Participant 9- Law enforcement officer).

On the other hand, the youth stated that the economic gain was acquired while they were in the gang and not the initial reasons for joining the gang. They were influenced by the gang leaders to partake in these activities but felt that they stuck together as a means of protection rather than gain since it was more important to them.

Peer Pressure

Another factor mentioned in the questionnaire was peer pressure but most of the participants chose to exclude this factor during the interview dialogue. A total of 80% (n=8) of participants, 30% (n=3) ex-gang members and 50% (n=5) professionals, believe that peer pressure played a role in youth gang membership while 10% (n=1) disagreed and 10% (n=1) chose not to answer. Most of the participants agreed that this factor is important but stated that the other factors were more important. Participant 2 (ex-gang member) stated that a lot of the newer youth gang members join because they try model the gang leaders by following their footsteps. They often times get taken advantage of and are asked to do the “dirty work” but end up in jail before it is too late.

Societal and Economic Costs

All of the participants, 100% (n=10), agreed that the Cambodian youth gang issue has a significant impact on a societal and economical level. During the interviews, the ex-gang members focused more on the impact on the community on the micro and mezzo levels while the professionals focused more on the economic costs on a macro level. The ex-gang members stated that today’s Cambodian youth gang problem is detrimental to
the society, more specifically the Cambodian community, because the issue is continuing
to grow and innocent people in the community are repeatedly harmed. “It’s a really big
problem in our society because it’s been going on for so long and has not died down. We
need to start taking actions if we want a bright future for our children” (Participant 3 - ex
gang member). Also agreeing that this issue affect’s the future generations, a law
enforcement officer said:

This youth gang issue is detrimental to the progression of Southeast Asian
immigrant communities. People who have fled their homelands to America in
order to have a better life now struggle with keeping their children off the streets
and away from the influence of fast money and gangster lifestyle (Participant 9-
law enforcement officer).

Moreover, the professionals also agreed that there is a significant impact on
community cohesiveness but shared more information about the economic costs of these
Cambodian youth gangs. All of the professionals talked about the costs of incarceration
and how it affects taxpayers. They reported that when the youth engages in criminal
activity, additional money is put into the criminal justice system towards arrests,
sentencing, and maintaining these gang members in jail.

Money being spent on gang task forces, prisons, and various law enforcement
grants could be used to improve our state’s educational system. Also, money
being made by youth gangs come from the sales of stolen property and vehicles,
as well as drug/weapons trafficking. The more money youth gangs make, the
more money is diverted from our state’s resources into law enforcement agendas (Participant 9- law enforcement officer).

Most of the professionals acknowledge that more and more money is allocated towards incarceration and taxpayers have to spend more money to keep these youth gang members in jail. A few of the professionals suggested that the priority of tax dollars should be distributed towards the creation of more prevention programs to stop these at-risk youth from joining these gangs before they end up in jail.

Recommendations for Youth Gang Intervention

A total of 50% (n=5) of the participants, 20% (n=2) ex-gang members and 30% (n=3) professionals, recommend youth programs as an essential tool towards helping youths get out of a gang while 30% (n=3), 20% ex-gang members and 10% (n=1) professional, feel that relocation is vital. The other 20% (n=2) of participants, both ex-gang members, believe that family intervention is required to help Cambodian youth terminate gang membership. Refer to Figure 2 for the respondents recommendations for gang intervention.

The Cambodian ex-gang members were a part of the youth gangs for an average of 11.8 years. Two of the ex-gangs members reported that they had to relocate in order to get out of their gangs while the other three reported that they grew out of it to start and maintain their families. The main motivation and inspiration to get out of the youth gangs, as reported by all of the ex-gang members, was the support of family and friends. “I felt like it wasn’t worth it anymore and got the support from family and friends to help me get out of the gang” (Participant 3 - ex gang member). Upon relocation, the two ex-
gang members turned to family to help them avoid mixing with the wrong crowd and repeating the gang lifestyle. “When I relocated, it met a different group of people that were goal-oriented. They helped me change my life around and I was able to achieve my educational goals” (Participant 1 - ex gang member). The other three felt that they had to do it for their wives and children so they would not be influenced by the gang culture. “I realized that the gang lifestyle was not the right choice for me, and I did not want my children to struggle like I did” (Participant 1 - ex gang member).

**Figure 2. Recommendations on Youth Gang Intervention**

Furthermore, all the Cambodian ex-gang members that successfully transitioned out of the youth gangs had support from their friends and family. The ex-gang member that made friends with goal oriented people met leaders he could learn from, and they helped him achieve his educational goals. The people that influenced them to retreat
from the youth gang lifestyle made them realize that there is a bright future for them and made it possible by extending their hand out to the ex-gang members.

**Afterschool Program**

The majority of the participants, 50% (n=5) that were interviewed stated that an afterschool youth program would be beneficial towards the progress of Cambodian youth gang termination. Most of the professionals had suggestions on how to cater the youth program to make it more effective for the Cambodian-specific population.

“Youth will only listen to those that will relate to them. Develop their ethnic interest in order to build identity and resiliency. They need a program that incorporates their parents to help them understand what their parents went through and this will help the youth empathize (Participant 6 - managing director).

Additionally, youth gang involvement is closely affected by factors such as family members’ involvement and one peers’ involvement. Ecologically speaking, people cope with their stressful environment by looking at how their friends and family cope with these adversities. Most of the youth live in low-income neighborhoods that are gang-infested making them easily influenced by the youth gang culture. With the help of afterschool youth programs with ethnic specific mentors, these youth can have that “role model” that will spark the change that they need and help them visualize their goals for the future. These ethnic-specific role models will help them pave the path towards success by “extending their hand” to guide them side by side. The youth program will also allow these youth to be around other youths with similar adversities and this mutual aid support group will let them provide support for one another.
Specific Activities and Programs to Help Alleviate Cambodian Youth Gang Problem

A total of 40% (n=4) participants stated that a cultural mentoring program and job skill training were most important towards alleviating the gang problem while 20% (n=2) recommended that cultural pride will help with the problem. “A program that has activities that encourages ethnic pride and teaches their history would be helpful, along with providing a place where the youth can be, to have an outlet from everyday struggle is essential” (Participant 7 - prevention specialist)

I would prefer to have an after school program where majority of the staff are of the same ethnicity or at least can relate to them. Adults whom will give them the time and effort in helping these youth succeed in life (Participant 8- Program manager).

Based on testimonials and experiences, the professionals who are staff from youth programs stated that having a mentor of the same ethnicity and background is crucial because it will allow the youths to establish a deeper connection to the mentors based on their similarities. The youth is more likely to listen to someone that has gone through similar struggles and has succeeded through those adversities. The youth will enjoy talking and listening to professionals that “understand” their struggles at home and in the community.

Summary

The information obtained from the participants through the survey questionnaire and interview guide provided the researcher with valuable and relevant information regarding the unique Cambodian youth population and their reasons for joining a youth
gang. Cambodian youths that are most affected by this social issue are influenced ecologically by their community and family members. Therefore; suggesting that living in crime-infested low income neighborhood and having family members who are in gangs does, indeed, increase the chances of youth gang membership by Cambodian youths.

The refugee experience endured by Cambodian families is the root factor contributing towards gang membership by Cambodian youths but the data obtained suggests that the influences are based more from the repercussions of the experience rather than the actual transitioning or trauma experienced by refugee parents. The mentioned repercussions focused on the acculturation issues within the household that caused a disconnection between the parents and children which led to the strong desire for a sense of belonging. These youths, as reported by the participants, lacked proper adult guidance and utilized youth gangs to find leaders and a close “family” for support and to help guide them through their adversities and towards success.

The study revealed that the Cambodian youth gang issue is disastrous not only to the Cambodian community’s growth and cohesiveness but to our society. Tax payers’ dollars are being spent more on the justice system rather than education and prevention/intervention programs that can help alleviate this social problem. Furthermore, the participants in this survey suggested that youth gang termination can successfully be accomplished with the support of family and friends that can help motivate and guide the youth gang members towards success and help them realize that it is not too late to change lifestyles and that there is a bright future ahead of them.
Additionally, the majority of the participants recommended that an ethnic-specific afterschool and mentoring program will provide these youths with the type of support that they need. They will receive expert knowledge and advice from mentors of the same ethnicity with similar backgrounds and can receive motivation and encouragement through peer support. The recommended activities proposed by the participants consist of a cultural mentoring program, job skill training, and cultural pride workshops.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Major Findings

The purpose of this research project was to explore factors contributing towards gang related activities amongst Southeast Asian youths, specifically the Cambodian at-risk youth population and identify recommendations for effective intervention. Review of literature concluded that the refugee experience is the main contributing factor towards youth’s gang involvement. For the most part, findings from this study support this assertion but there is a lot more to the refugee experience than what the literature suggests. Most of the literature reviewed assumes that Cambodian youths of this generation continue to suffer from trauma as a result of the refugee experience. Based on the results of the study, it is commonly understood that today’s Cambodian youths do not suffer from war trauma from the refugee experience but rather from acculturation and lack of proper adult guidance. These factors are the main reasons for youth gang membership amongst Cambodian at-risk youth because since they feel that they are not getting adequate support from their families so they turn to youth gangs to feel a sense of belonging and guidance by the gang members and leaders. These assumptions that the youth population continue to suffer from trauma is detrimental to the Cambodian community. By labeling these youths as victims, professionals are degrading them and assuming that they are incapable which is obviously not true. Many generations have passed and today’s Cambodian youths have shown significant improvements socially, academically, and economically. Currently, there are many young advocates and leaders
in the Cambodian community assisting with the positive growth of this community. As the generations go on, the Cambodian community will progress in a positive direction as long as they continue to focus on educational attainment, family reunification and awareness on social and economic issues to empower members of the community.

Evaluation/Limitations

Initially, the current research project aimed towards obtaining 15 total participants, which included 10 ex-gang members and 5 professionals. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen factors, the researcher had to settle for 10 participants. During the recruiting portion of the research study, the researcher encountered drop outs by the respondents due to complications of schedules, trust issues, and lack of incentives. With the professionals, it was tremendously difficult to get a hold of and get responses back, even after making numerous phone calls, and sending several emails regarding the scheduling of the interviews. Other potential subjects agreed to participate in the study and received the research materials but failed to respond or send back the forms.

Additionally, trust was a key issue that arose during the recruitment process of the Cambodian ex-gang members. Evidently, there was mistrust between ex-gang members and researchers because some ex-gang members that were contacted reported that they did not want to “leak,” confidential information or incriminate themselves in any way. Some ex-gang members warned the researcher, stating that “Gang members do not like researchers or journalists, so be careful who you talk to.”

On the other hand, the issue of confidentially came up repeatedly during the research, not only with the ex-gang members but with the professionals. While the ex-
gang members were concerned about confidentially as it pertains to their safety, some law enforcement officers that were contacted for research were concerned about their reputation. The researcher was repeatedly asked not to include their division and only use the “law enforcement or police officer,” title. Some law enforcement officers that agreed to participate in the study backed out as a result of not wanting to expose their information about their division.

Implications for Social Work

First and foremost, the findings of the research study is relevant to social work because it provides social workers more Cambodian specific research materials to utilize since there is a lack of published resources on this population, especially about Cambodian youth gangs. Social workers will be more culturally competent, by having a better understanding of the uniqueness of the youth gang population and also be able to distinguish between the specific adversities faced by the different generations within the community. The information gathered in this study will provide social workers a clear understanding of the factors that contribute towards youth gang membership amongst Cambodian youths and prevention and intervention ideas to help with Cambodian youth gang members. With the knowledge and valuable information learned about the population, social workers can successfully respond culturally towards meeting the needs of this community.

Implication for Researchers

As researchers, we tend to approach our “subjects,” as if we are the “experts” but fail to realize that our participants think otherwise. Based on my interactions with ex-
gang members, they feel that researchers assume that they have superior knowledge about the population and are doing the youth gang population a “favor,” by conducting the research. These ex-gang members often feel they are being treated like animals being observed. It is important, especially with this population, to build rapport rather than immediately proceeding with the interview. The Cambodian youth gang population feels more comfortable dialoguing and sharing information with researchers that can relate to them and understand them so it is important to work with them side by side like partners. Confidentially and the process of the study should be explained thoroughly to eliminate confusion or any feelings of uncertainty. This population requires that the researcher make them feel secure and confident that they will not be incriminated or exposed in any way, so emphasizing confidentiality is essential. Additionally, we as researchers should take the time to thank and praise our subjects for their contributions because they are providing us with useful information to help alleviate this growing youth gang issue. Furthermore, additional research needs to be conducted in order to fill the gaps in the current information provided by this research study. It is crucial for future researchers to analyze the success, and recidivism rate of ethnic youth programs, and through these programs, future researchers could gather more information from the participants about addition needs to assist this community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

During the interviews, an interesting suggestion was brought up by one of the ex-gang members regarding youth gang interventions. The ex-gang member agreed that an ethnic specific youth program would be beneficial to help alleviate the social issue but
also stated that at the end of the day, these at-risk youths go back to their broken homes and gang infested neighborhoods. As much as these youth gang members want to leave the gang lifestyle, ecologically, they are trapped in their environment where it is almost impossible to change. As suggested by the ex-gang member, we as a society need to change the environment for these at-risk youth, and help change the gang culture and improve family function. The ethnic specific mentoring youth program is one step towards achieving the society’s goal of alleviating this social issue since it will allow these youths to relate to mentors of the same ethnicity and background, giving them hope that they too can leave their gang lifestyle and succeed in their professional careers. Another step is to integrate families into the youth program to improve the structure and dynamics of these households and this will make a world of difference and hopefully improve the community’s overall success in this country.
APPENDIX A

Consent Form

I ______________ (print name) have been asked to participate in a research study by Alvin Thlang, a Masters of Social Work student at California State University, Sacramento.

Purpose: I understand that the purpose of this study is to find factors contributing to gang involvement amongst Southeast Asian youth in hopes to create a youth program to help decrease this youth gang problem and increase educational attainment.

Duration and Location: I understand that the study will take about 60 minutes of my time and that I will be interviewed over the phone or in the convenience on my own home.

Procedures: I will be asked to fill out a questionnaire and answer questions about my experiences and involvement with the Southeast Asian youth gang population through an interview.

Risks/Discomforts: It has been explained to me that some of the interview questions are very personal and can evoke emotional responses about past experiences.

Benefits: I understand that the benefits from participating in this study may help researchers and those involved in social services profession better serve this population and understand the factors that lead to the starting and stopping of youth gang involvement.

Confidentiality: I understand that a research code number will be used to identify my responses from those of other clients and that my name, address, and other identifying information will not be directly associated with any information obtained from me. As a safety procedure, no real names will be written on documents pertaining to the study. Pseudonyms may be used to distinguish participants to give the research a clear understanding of specific positions and roles but nothing remotely close to the subject’s names. Incriminating information will not be a part of the study and will not be used or recorded for any reason. The information received from my subjects is for the sole purpose of youth program development and will be destroyed after the study is done. When results of this study are published, my name or other identifying information will not be used and consent form will be destroyed 30 days following the completion of study.

Right to Withdraw: I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences. However, if I choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there is no way to identify my anonymous document after it has been turned into the researcher.

Signatures: I have read this entire consent form and completely understand my rights as a potential research subject. I voluntarily consent to participate in this research. I have been informed that I will receive a copy of this consent should questions arise and I wish to contact Mr. Thlang or the California State University, Sacramento Review Board (916-278-7565) to discuss my rights as a research subject.

IRB Approval: This study has been reviewed and approved by California State University, Sacramento’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies.

________________________________    ____/_____/________
Signature of Research Subject      Date
APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

The purpose of the “Invest in the Youth,” research study is to find factors contributing to gang related activities amongst Southeast Asian youth in hopes to create a youth program to help decrease this youth gang problem and increase educational attainment. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. However, should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there is no way to identify your anonymous document after it has been turned into the investigator. All information obtained throughout the study will be kept confidential and all documents will be destroyed after 30 days of completion of study.

1. What is your professional title? ___________________

2. How long have you known of this Southeast Asian youth gang issue? ____ Years

3. What is your experiences/involvement with Southeast Asian youth gangs

_____ I was a part of a youth gang
_____ I overlooked youth gangs in a previous job
_____ I grew up in crime/youth gang infested neighborhoods
_____ I worked as a director/counselor for a youth group
_____ I was a part of the Gang task force working with youth gangs
_____ I have family members who were/are in youth gangs
Other experiences ______________________________________

4. Why do you think Cambodian Youths resort to gangs?

[A]-Agree [N]-Neutral [D]- Disagree

Seeking Protection

Acculturation/Identity issues, adjustment issue

Seeking a sense of belonging

Economic benefits

Peer Pressure  (all of my friends are in gang)
5. How do Cambodian gangs differ from other ethnic youth gangs?

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<th>SD</th>
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<td>Nature of Crime committed (homicide, robbery)</td>
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<td>Refugee Experience (Acculturation, discipline, etc)</td>
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<td>Socio Economic Status (poverty, low income housing)</td>
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<td>Gender roles (stratification, pressure, hyper masculine)</td>
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<td>Other _____________________________</td>
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6. To what extent did the following refugee related experience in America contribute to the Southeast Asian youth gang problem?

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<td>Poverty</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban living</td>
<td>□</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family conflicts</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other __________________ [Check all that apply]</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. What would you recommend that would help Southeast Asian youths get out of gangs? [Please pick one]

___ Youth Program. Please Circle one: [Traditional or Cultural]
___ Sports
___ Family Intervention
___ Relocation
8. What specific activity or program would you suggest that will help aid this youth gang issue? [Please pick one]

____ Cultural Pride
____ Sports
____ Cultural performances
____ Job skill training
____ Cultural musical instruments
____ Cultural mentoring program [ethnic specific mentors]
Other ________________________________
APPENDIX C

Interview Guide Part A (Professionals)

Do you think that Sacramento and Stockton has a Southeast Asian youth gang problem?

Where in these areas are there high concentrations of Southeast Asian youth gangs?

Have you had direct contact with Southeast Asian youth gangs? When and where?

How much of a problem do you think this youth gang issue is to our society?

Do you think that there are economic costs associated with youth gangs?

What factors, not mentioned in the survey, would you say directly or indirectly contributes to Southeast Asian youth gang involvement?

From your experiences and observations, what are the main reasons why Cambodian youths resort to gangs?

How are Cambodian gangs different from other ethnic gangs?

Do you think an ethnic specific afterschool youth program will be beneficial to this issue? If so, What type of programs/activities would be beneficial to the Cambodian youths?

Comments:
APPENDIX D

Interview Guide Part B (Ex-Gang Members)

How old were you when you first joined a youth gang?

Why did you join the youth gang?

Do you think your family’s refugee experience influenced your involvement with gangs?

How long were you a member for?

What influenced you to get out of the youth gang?

Did you fear for your life or safety upon leaving the youth gang?

How was the transitioning period from when you left the gang to when you turned your life around?

How much of a problem do you think this youth gang issue is to our society and economy?

Comments:
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